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ABSTRACT

One of a series of instructional booklets designed to introduce adult education program planners to the basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies for conducting needs assessments, this instructional booklet deals with determining where to find information for use in conducting needs assessments. Described first is the relationship of the process of determining where information can be found to the entire needs assessment process. Next concepts and processes are set forth for locating representative authority groups from institutions and associations as well as independent individual authorities. Following a discussion of the concept of target population, basic steps are provided for identifying and describing a representative sample of the target population for a needs assessment. Examined next are the basic types of printed information as well as their accessibility in relation to given needs assessment undertakings. (MN)

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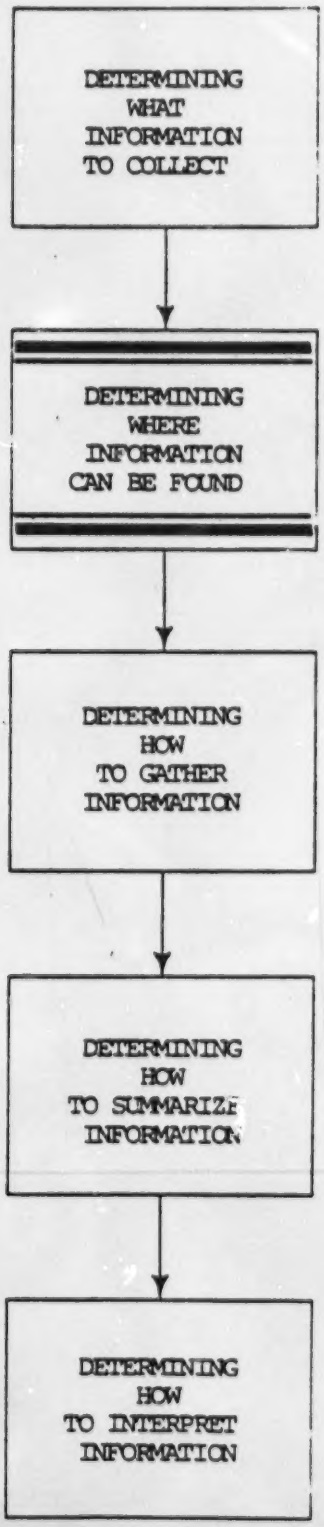
AN INTRODUCTION TO NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Special Community Service
and Continuing Education
Project.

Final Report.


DETERMINING WHAT INFORMATION TO COLLECT
DETERMINING WHERE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND
DETERMINING HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO SUMMARIZE INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO INTERPRET INFORMATION

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CE033136

DETERMINING

WHERE

INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND

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SERIES PREFACE

This instructional booklet is one of a series prepared by the Special Community Service and Continuing Education staff at Texas A&M University. Its purpose is to introduce a diverse body of adult education program planners to basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies appropriate for conducting needs assessments. A broad base of research and information relevant to practice has been tapped in the development of the series.

This series is not in its final form but is rather "in development" as prepared for one-on-one testing in conjunction with a collection of adult education practitioners. Refinements are to be made subsequent to one-on-one, small group and field testing.

Recognition is given to those agencies and individuals who have contributed to the development of this series:

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Participants in the pilot test activities for generating case study applications: Mr. David R. Chagoya, Mr. Robert Felder, Ms. Alice Franzke, Mr. Jon Johnson, Sr. Maria J. Leavy, Mr. Jose D. Leza, Lt. Col. James V. Mahoney, Jr., Mr. G. M. Milburn, Jr., Capt. William J. Schrank, Ms. Lois Soefje and Mr. Charles Weichert.

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BOOKLET 2

DETERMINING WHERE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND

Introduction

Analogy

Surely, most of us have gone fishing at some point in our lives. Perhaps many of us go fishing a good bit of the time. If you have any feel for the great sport, you should be right at home with this instructional booklet. You will not be left "at bay".

The first item on your agenda is to determine what kind of delectable or trophy, as the case may be, you want to catch. What is it that you are after anyway? This is just the question that the previous instructional booklet set out to have you think about. You have always had a fascination with oysters, let us say, especially the ones with the little pearls in them. You have always been secretly dreaming about having that kind of luck in retrieving what you were after.

You have several alternatives open before you in your quest for oysters. The be all and the end all is to catch the little buggers. You may decide to journey down to the gulf and at the docks, begin to ask the commercial fishermen just where they found the biggest catches that day, or you may decide to check with the state Fish and Game Department Information Officer and set out, based on the information he could provide. Yet again, you may rely on the merchants whose stock

and trade is running deep sea fishing jaunts for a hopeful public; you may decide to study the maritime charts available in the Corpus Museum of the Texas Gulf; or you may decide that you are an honest, sincere, upright, and reasonably intelligent fisherman, and you may rely solely on your own resources to help you to get to what you are searching for —the oyster— preferably with a pearl. You may even have to deal with finding discrepant information as you tap into the vast and diverse store of information. And, of course, you will have to deal with this diversity before you actually set out on your great fishing expedition, but this is an issue to be dealt with at a later point. Now you want to tap into those sources which can give you the best information.

There, the analogy stops, for in the world of human affairs, you not only could rely on yourself, the word of select experts, an array of already available information tucked away in neat little crannies, but you also could ask the "oysters" the question of where they are. This booklet will lead you to identify the most appropriate sources of information.

Purpose

As stated briefly in An Introduction to Needs Assessment, this unit aims to help you become familiar with major alternative sources of information for the needs assessment and to provide you with some techniques for locating such sources efficiently.

If you are in the process of identifying needs of your client group, whom would you approach and where would you go to solicit good information? Very probably, you might go to your supervisor or someone you have identified as having special knowledge or experience; you

might want to talk to a number of your clients; or you might simply read through an array of written records which you judge relevant. Now you are on the right track. But in order to simplify the situation, in this booklet, we are going to group all these varying sources of information into two major types. The first type is key informant which includes both authorities and target population; the second type is printed information. These three concepts will be defined and the process for identifying these sources will be described. Illustrative examples will be provided.

Linkage

The previous booklet has helped answer your questions on what information to collect. It has helped you determine the goal categories, goals and measures which form the basis for the rest of your needs assessment undertaking. This booklet will lead you to identify systematically the major sources of need information. In other words, we will assist you in specifying where you may be able to obtain the most abundant and relevant information for your needs assessment. Then, in the following booklet, we will show you the various approaches from which you can choose to effectively collect need information.

Rationale

The identification of relevant sources of information in a needs assessment undertaking is of great importance. First, the location and selection of relevant sources of information at an early stage of the study would maximize your possibilities for collecting valid and reliable information. You must go to the best sources if you expect to get the best information. Second, focusing only on selected relevant

information sources is an efficient procedure, for you can concentrate on a manageable number of relevant sources instead of seeking information from all possible sources. The output of this process, we can guarantee you, would be of much higher quality and would relate much more effectively to your particular study. Third, more generally, the selection of relevant sources of information would help you to identify the needs of your clients and assure congruence between services provided by institutions and services needed. It is, therefore, one step that shouldn't be neglected.

Frequently, the leadership within various institutions have been considered sole decision makers in establishing programs and services for client groups while the owners of needs--the clients or potential clients of service--are deprived of their role in those social decision-making processes which impact their daily lives. In this needs assessment model, however, the "authority on need" and "owners of needs" are not seen to be "either/or" alternative sources of information; instead, they are seen as involved in a "both/and" relationship and are tapped to complement each other in the provision of need information. They are the principal actors and constitute independent "world" views on the needs in question. The integrity of the perceptions of both groups should be respected. In fact, these two sources, authorities and owners of needs, most frequently constitute the principal sources of needs information. They are considered your primary sources of information since you have collected information from them specifically to serve the purposes of your needs assessment. Lastly, if we keep in mind that we have defined need as a discrepancy between a present state and an

ideal state, we must emphasize the point that needs must be identified and asserted by someone or someones. Throughout the needs assessment process we will be focusing upon who asserts the need. In working with the target population of a needs assessment, attention must be given to the fact that different subgroups of the target population may differ both in the intensity or the nature of their needs. In other words, an identified need may not be found to exist equally for all subgroups of the target population, but, in fact, may vary with respect to differences in the population such as age, sex or other critical characteristics.

Printed information is a secondary source of needs information in the sense that it was collected by another group for its own purposes. In the absence of primary information, information you directly collect from key informants, you can employ secondary sources as exclusive sources of information. You can also use printed information as an adjunct source of data for verifying a present state of affairs described by either authorities or target groups. Last but not least, you also can treat it as trend data to guide the determination of a desired state of affairs.

Determining Authorities

In this section, we are going to introduce to you the concept of authority and the most effective process for locating representative authorities.

Concept

Authority is defined as that individual who by reason of superior knowledge or extensive experience in a given arena of human activity is in a good position to know the clientele's needs. Authorities may be

public officials; leaders of local pressure groups; professionals; administrative or program personnel in community agencies, business and industry, civic agencies, welfare groups and religious institutions. More specifically, if, as the chairman of the county ministerial association, you are going to deal with the emotional life of your target population in the needs assessment, some authorities that you might approach for information might be fellow ministers, directors of women's centers, directors of mental health centers, or certain health-related professionals such as psychiatrists or psychologists. Authorities can be found within both the formal public and private institutions as well as the voluntary associations of the community. The two types of entities, though structurally and functionally unique, differ markedly in their ability to respond and in the mode of response to new and unmet needs. They fulfill ideally complementary functions within the community. At times, authorities may also be independent individuals who, because of any number of reasons, are knowledgeable about the needs with respect to a particular goal or for a particular clientele of interest within your needs assessment. Thus, they are good sources to tap for need information.

Process

Now, we are going to recommend four basic steps for efficiently locating the representative authority groups from institutions, and associations as well as independent individual authorities.

First, you want to identify those institutions and associations that are providing goods or services in meeting the goals identified for study in the needs assessment. Brainstorm a list of such groups

which are relevant to your inquiry. For instance, if you are the director of an area council on aging and deal with the physical needs of senior citizens in a certain community, you definitely want to approach the local director at the senior citizen center in your region. You may also want to visit with administrators from nursing homes and community health centers in the district as well as the officials of local senior voluntary programs such as the Retired Teachers Association (R.T.A.), and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (R.S.V.P.).

Second, you do not want to ignore independent individuals in the community who have special knowledge and/or experience about the need areas to be addressed in the study. Continue your list by brainstorming for these individuals: Mr. Sam Johnson, who is an energetic volunteer helping with the local community programs on aging; Miss Sadie Russell, who has adopted several elder citizens from the nursing home as foster grandparents; and Colonel Sanders, who is the chairman of the local senior citizens club. You surely don't want to miss them while gathering need information.

Third, choose a workable number of institutions and associations you would actually approach in the needs assessment because they contribute a great deal or they contribute uniquely to the realization of the goals identified by providing a service or program not provided by other groups.

Fourth, choose a workable number of independent individual authorities you would actually approach, also, because they contribute significantly and uniquely to the realization of the goals identified.

Thus, the Principle for Practice is that needs assessors should

identify representative authorities who are involved in making significant and unique contributions to the goals and target population of the study.

Determining Target Population

In the following section, we will introduce you to the concept of target population. We will also provide you with the basic steps for identifying and describing a representative sample of the target population for your study.

Concept

Target population is defined as that group of persons selected to assert the presence or absence of their own needs for a given needs assessment undertaking. This group, in fact, can be described as the potential owners of need. The group constitutes clientele or potential clientele for your future programming activities. In contrast to our earlier focus on authorities, who assert or prescribe needs for others, the target population speaks in its own behalf. They, from their own perceptions, describe their present status and their levels of aspiration. For example, as a county extension agent concerned with nutrition of the families within your county, it is possible that any one of the following or several of the following groups would be identified as your target population: women in the low rent housing complexes in the cities, women in the rural areas of the county, elderly members of the county who are relying on their own resources to procure and prepare daily meals, families on food stamps, single working men and women in the community, pregnant women or women with infant children, and the handicapped. Any one of these groups or several groups in consort could

be realistic target populations given your role or responsibility within the extension service.

Process

Now we are going to recommend basic steps in determining your target population for the needs assessment undertaking.

First, in any given needs assessment, it is necessary to specify or make explicit that population which is relevant to your particular institution. Specifically, you need to identify those you are mandated to serve, by reason of your mission. For instance, if you are a regional training director in the Southwestern Life Insurance Association, the population which is relevant to you would most likely be the full range of bank clerks in the various departments of the bank, the first line supervisory personnel for each of these departments, as well as department officers for each of the six banks and their branches within your region. Quite a different population would be relevant to you were your role one within the personnel office as director of public relations and public information for the insurance association. Identifying your relevant population most often will involve you in specifying your clientele and your service area.

Second, it may also be important to make explicit any segments of the relevant population which currently are receiving emphasis or the priority attention of your institution. For example, the Continuing Education Division of Monticello University aims to provide continuing education programs for all high school graduates age sixteen or over in the greater Dallas - Fort Worth area, which is their population of relevance. However, they have been making a major investment in

programs for mid-management and upwardly mobile women from business and industry in the greater metroplex, their priority clientele.

Third, it is also advisable to identify any group or groups within your relevant population who are not currently being served. Thus to refer back to the county extension agent, it is quite possible that her relevant population is all teens and young and not-so-young adults in the county who are responsible for their own and/or others' nutrition. Perhaps, at present, rural women with young families are being served almost exclusively and the single working man or woman living alone or the urban heads of household on welfare have not been served at all. Seeing clearly your clientele and service area, your priority groups and those not being served helps highlight the choices which you have before you in terms of identifying a target population for your needs assessment undertaking.

Fourth, your next task is to review what you have identified in the previous activities and make a decision regarding whom you would like to study, your target group. At this point, your basic intuition and hard won experience come to the fore and assist you in making the value judgement. There may be instances in which it is advisable to include as a focus for your study all of your clientele in your service area. You may want to study the nutritional needs of all of those whom you have been charged to serve. On the other hand, you may decide that a strategy of "divide and conquer" is what is called for and so you are going to study at this time only those groups who have been neglected through no fault of their own but rather only because of your lack of time and resources to respond to them. Or perhaps, those

groups whom you have been serving with the "good old stand-by programs" seem to be growing weary of the same old basic food groups routine. There may even be instances in which you are in the throes of developing an entirely new dimension within your mission and therefore you choose to study as a target group some collection of persons previously not part of your relevant population at all. It is important to select as a target population that group or those groups who you judge as ripe for study at this time.

Fifth, once a target population has been identified for the needs assessment, you will want to set about describing that group. This procedure has several important consequences: first, you will be in a better position to sample the target group when you begin to gather information; and second, you will be in a better position to summarize and interpret your data once you have gathered them. Perhaps the best way to start describing your target population is to take a serious look at the goals you have chosen to study at the same time you look at your selected target population. Perhaps, as an extension agent, your goals included: the improvement of nutrition, the development of responsible fiscal budgeting and the improvement of housekeeping maintenance. Let us also suppose that your target group is all women in the rural communities. What are some of the ways we could get at a good description of such a large and diverse target group? What characteristics or descriptions are likely to be important given this target group of women and these three goals for study? We would suggest, as a start, that age, economic bracket of household, number of persons in household, farm or non-farm household, section of the county and

employment status might be important characteristics to consider. These characteristics are important because they help you picture more clearly just exactly how diverse your target group is likely to be and with such an awareness you will be in an excellent position to identify a representative sample of this target group as key informants for your study. Further, these characteristics are important during the data collection process in determining who in the target group actually have some of the needs; it may be exclusively the non-farm women, or those raising five dependents on welfare checks and food stamps. Obviously, needs will surface for some subgroups but not for all of your target population. Knowing this and collecting this kind of information ultimately will enable you to target your educational and service programs. Many population characteristics can be classified as they relate to personal status like age, sex, race, native tongue and citizenship; to residence, like place of residence or type of residence; to affiliation, like religious affiliation and membership in community groups; to family, like marital status, number of children and members of household; and to socio-economic status, like years of school completed, income per year and occupation.

Sixth, the final task in determining the target population is that of determining how to locate a representative sample of the target group for study. It is possible, but not too likely, that you decide to collect information from all members of your target population. Generally, this is not a feasible strategy and you should settle on selecting a representative sample for the needs assessment inquiry. For example, you may decide to survey five non-farm families and five

farm families in each of the ten rural districts within the county. You may decide to visit every tenth house. You may decide to survey for a solid week from 10 a.m. to 12 noon all women at the welfare office. You may decide to survey one member from every fellowship circle in the twenty rural churches in the county. In this step, what you will want to do is list or brainstorm all of the alternative strategies for locating a representative sample of your target population. Once this is done, you will evaluate each strategy and include or discard it on the basis of whether it either individually or in consort will help you to locate a representative sample.

Thus, the Principle for Practice is that needs assessors should identify and describe a representative sample of their target population.

Determining Printed Information

In this last section, we will discuss with you the basic types of printed information and help you to judge the accessibility of each one of them in relation to your needs assessment undertaking.

Concept

Basically, Printed Information is defined as data already collected and available. It may be statistical series, or references containing information collected by persons or agencies for purposes other than your needs assessment. They may be government documents, census reports, service records, agency files, literature, publication of professional associations, or research studies done both in the public and private sectors. For example, as a member of a recently formed community group, Citizens for a Healthy Hondo, you may have

decided to study, among other things, potential substance abuse within the community as reflected by the following six measures: annual dollars spent on non-prescription relaxants, annual dollars spent on prescription relaxants, annual dollars spent on alcoholic beverages, annual dollars spent on cigarettes, annual dollars spent on coffee and annual use of prohibited drug substances. You could approach a pharmacist for information on his or her inventory or sales records for non-prescriptive tranquilizers, sleeping preparations and muscle relaxants. You could do the same for records on prescriptions. Supermarkets, gas stations and convenience stores have records of volume of cigarette sales. Liquor stores have records of sales of alcoholic beverages on at least an annual basis. For low alcoholic content beverages, again, records of convenience stores, supermarkets and service stations could be tapped. Further, you may have access to the statewide study conducted in 1978 on substance abuse by regions within the state according to age and sex for the population over sixteen years of age. Other relevant printed information might also be available to you in your needs assessment.

Process

We are now going to suggest two steps in the process for locating printed information.

First, you will want to identify possible documents, printed information, that will give you information relating to your area of inquiry. Brainstorm a list of known printed information. It might include federal, state or local government documents, research studies, service records, agency records, literature, publications of professional

associations and news items in local newspapers. For example, let us assume that you are the director of community education in Delaware County and that one specific goal of your needs assessment undertaking is to improve the pre-vocational competence of young adults age eighteen to twenty-one in your county. Your measures for this study are: number of young adults in the county with high school diplomas; number of young adults in the county with previous job experience; number of young adults in the county with marketable skills; number of young adults in the county actively seeking jobs; number of young adults in the county knowledgeable of job openings; number of unemployed young adults in the county who have been fired from previous jobs and the number of young adults in the county who have the knowledge of information, dress and behavior required in applying for a job. The printed information which you might identify consists of: high school diplomas; academic records; student files; placement folders; personnel office records; employment office records of applications, hirings and dismissals; school district annual graduation reports; transcripts from college or vocational technical schools and armed forces recruiting office records. You might even be able to locate a number of state or community studies addressing the vocational needs of young adults.

Second, you will want to judge whether the documents or written records are geographically, legally, politically, ethically and temporally accessible. In other words, you should ask yourself a number of questions. First, is it physically possible for me to get hold of each specific document or is it now housed in Austin or at the Depart-

ment of Defense or Education? Second, are there any legal constraints that prohibit me from obtaining the printed information? Third, would there be any political reasons that the printed information cannot or will not be made available? Fourth, would there be any ethical reason for the printed information not to be divulged? Fifth, would the printed information have been destroyed because records are only maintained for limited periods of time? Using the above example, a large portion of the printed information may be inaccessible because of one or more of the above considerations. However, you will want to be sure and tap those documents which are accessible to your study while deleting that printed information that is practically inaccessible.

In other words, the Principle for Practice is that needs assessors should identify the type of printed information which is accessible for the study.

Summary

To refresh your memory, we would like to give you a brief summary of what we have presented in this booklet.

There are two major information sources that you can approach in conducting a needs assessment. They are the key informants, which includes authorities and target population; and printed information.

Authorities are representatives from institutions or independent knowledgeable individuals who are tapped to provide information concerning the needs of others. A workable number of authorities who contribute much or contribute uniquely to the realization of the identified goals should be identified and approached for your study.

Target population comprises individuals who identify needs which

they themselves possess. It is essential that you identify and describe at an early stage of your study a representative sample of the target population; namely a group of potential owners of need.

Finally, printed information refers to all existing written records which could be employed for your study. Your ultimate selection of information from these written sources would depend on the accessibility of the sources.

We hope by now that you have become familiar with the various possible sources for need information and equipped with techniques to locate them efficiently. With this accomplished, we can address the different methods for gathering need information. This will be the main focus in the following booklet, Booklet 3: Determining How to Gather Information.